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Series: epigenetics

Statistical and integrative system-level analysis of DNA methylation data

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Abstract

Epigenetics plays a key role in cellular development and function. Alterations to the epigenome are thought to capture and mediate the effects of genetic and environmental risk factors on complex disease. Currently, DNA methylation is the only epigenetic mark that can be measured reliably and genome-wide in large numbers of samples. This Review discusses some of the key statistical challenges and algorithms associated with drawing inferences from DNA methylation data, including cell-type heterogeneity, feature selection, reverse causation and system-level analyses that require integration with other data-types such as gene expression, genotype, transcription factor binding and other epigenetic information.

Introduction

DNA methylation (DNAm) refers to the covalent attachment of a methyl (CH₃) group to DNA bases, which for eukaryotes is usually 5-methylcytosine (5mC) in the context of cytosine–guanine dinucleotides (CpGs). Like other epigenetic modifications, DNAm is mitotically heritable and plays a key role in embryonic development and regulation of gene expression¹. As such, DNAm is highly cell-type specific. DNAm is also influenced by genotype and can be altered by exposure to external factors, such as smoking and diet^{2–6}. Like somatic mutations, DNAm changes accrue with age^{4,7,8} and are thought to mediate the effects of environmental risk factors on disease incidence, but also contribute to disease progression and treatment resistance^{9,10}. Irrespective of their potential causal role, DNAm-based biomarkers offer great promise for risk

prediction, early detection and prognosis ⁹. Their discovery is facilitated by technologies that allow genome-wide measurement of DNAm in a high-throughput manner ¹¹. Importantly, the metastability of DNAm, as well as the DNA-based nature of the assays, provide important technical advantages over measuring histone modifications or mRNA expression. DNAm assays based on bisulfite conversion [G] in particular, are highly
5 quantitative and reproducible, offering high sensitivity to detect small (~1%) changes in DNAm from samples with limited amounts of available DNA. Among these, the Illumina beadchip microarray technology ^{12,13} offers a good compromise between cost and coverage, and is so far still the most popular choice for epigenome-wide association studies [G] (EWAS) which require DNAm measurements in hundreds if not thousands of samples ¹³. By contrast, the higher coverage and cost of whole-genome bisulfite sequencing
10 (WGBS) and reduced-representation bisulfite sequencing (RRBS) make these the optimal technologies for mapping reference DNA methylomes, as generated by international consortia such as the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) Roadmap Epigenomics Project, the International Human Epigenome Consortium (IHEC) and Blueprint ^{14,15}, or for measuring genome-wide DNAm patterns from low-yield DNA samples such as cell-free DNA (cfDNA) in plasma ¹⁶.

15 Rigorous and reliable inference from DNAm data is key to a wide range of downstream tasks in EWAS, including the identification of disease biomarkers and causal relationships. These tasks require careful statistical analyses, starting with quality control steps that assess the reliability of the data, followed by intra-sample normalization [G] to adjust for sample-specific technical biases (e.g. incomplete bisulfite conversion and background correction). Beyond the obvious importance and need for such normalization, downstream
20 statistical analyses need to deal with other challenges, including notably batch effects and other confounding [G] factors, feature selection [G] and integration with other omic data types. Given that DNAm is highly cell-type specific, cell-type heterogeneity of complex tissues (e.g. blood or breast) constitutes a major confounder, requiring the application of cell-type deconvolution algorithms. These algorithms offer a form of *in-silico* or virtual microdissection, allowing inference of DNAm changes that are not driven by alterations in tissue
25 composition. Other DNAm alterations have been found to be reproducibly associated with different environmental factors (e.g. smoking and obesity) ¹⁷⁻¹⁹, which can also cause confounding in EWAS. Reverse causation also poses challenges, as observed in the case of the relationship between obesity and DNA methylation, where the prevailing evidence points to the phenotype of interest altering DNAm rather than *vice versa* ^{18,20}. The interpretability of an EWAS is also limited by DNAm being an imperfect measure of
30 gene activity, thus requiring integration with other data types (e.g. mRNA expression or chromatin immunoprecipitation followed by sequencing (ChIP-seq)), in order to help improve causal inference and interpretation. Although statistical methods for such integrative analyses are underdeveloped, the technical reliability of DNAm measurements make DNAm the ideal epigenetic focal point for such system-level analyses.

Here we discuss the aforementioned statistical challenges and review the corresponding computational algorithms and software, focusing throughout on downstream analyses, i.e. post intra-sample normalization. We first consider confounding factors, due to the need for determining the major sources of inter-sample variation, with an emphasis on cellular heterogeneity and cell-type deconvolution algorithms. Next, we turn to the main task of an EWAS, which is feature selection. To help the interpretation of EWAS data, we subsequently describe methods for integrating DNAm with other omic data types, including genotype, mRNA expression and transcription factor binding data, including approaches to strengthen causal inference. We end with an outlook on outstanding statistical challenges and a vision on how the field will develop. Details of technologies for generating DNAm data and associated intra-sample normalization methods are not covered here, since they were recently reviewed elsewhere ²¹⁻²⁴.

[H1] Cell-type heterogeneity and deconvolution

EWAS seek to identify differentially methylated cytosines [G] (DMCs) between cases and controls. This task is hampered by variations in the proportions of cell types that make up the tissue where DNAm is measured. These proportions may vary substantially between cases and controls, and while this variation may be biologically and clinically important ^{25,26}, they often reflect changes that are consequential of the disease-state, hampering the identification of alterations that may drive disease risk or progression ²⁷⁻²⁹. For example, rheumatoid arthritis (RA) was shown to be associated with a shift in the granulocyte-to-lymphocyte ratio, leading to thousands of DMCs, most of which disappeared upon correction for cell-type composition ³⁰.

In general, cell-type deconvolution methods are needed to address any one of the following four aims: estimation of absolute or relative cell-type fractions within the samples of interest; identification of DMCs that are not the result of changes in cell-type composition; identification of DNAm profiles representing cell-types in the tissue of interest; and identification of the cell type (or types) carrying the DMCs. Broadly speaking, statistical paradigms for cell-type deconvolution fall into two main categories, called ‘reference-based’ ³¹ (if it uses a-priori defined DNAm reference profiles of representative cell types in the tissue of interest), and ‘reference-free’ ³² (**Box 1**). A third paradigm (“semi-reference-free”) has also emerged ^{33,34}, which circumvents some of the disadvantages of both reference-free and reference-based methods (**Box 1**).

[H3] Reference-based cell-type deconvolution. The main requirement underlying reference-based inference is that the main constituent cell types of the tissue are known, and that reference molecular profiles are available that represent these cell types. Importantly, the reference profiles only need to be defined over features that are informative of differences between cell types, e.g. in the DNAm context they should ideally represent cell-type specific DNAm markers, or be highly discriminative of the different cell subtypes in the tissue of interest. The construction of such reference profiles usually needs to be done in advance of the study, and typically requires the generation of genome-wide DNAm data of cell populations purified by

fluorescence-activated cell sorting (FACS) or magnetic-activated cell sorting (MACS), followed by statistical analysis to select DMCs between cell subtypes. The importance of constructing a high-quality reference profile database has recently been highlighted³⁵. For instance, similar cell types are likely to have highly co-linear profiles, which may result in unstable parameter estimation³⁶. This is of particular concern if quality control causes a relatively large number of CpGs present in the reference database to drop out, which may further aggravate the co-linearity. Hence, it has been proposed that a reference database should maximize the condition number $[G]$ of the matrix it defines³⁷, which in effect ensures maximal stability of the inference to random loss of features in the reference database.

Assuming a reference database exists, there are then two approaches to infer cell-type fractions within a sample of interest. Both methods effectively run a multivariate regression of the sample's DNAm profile against the reference DNAm profiles as covariates, with the estimated regression coefficients corresponding to cell-type fractions (if appropriately normalized) (**Fig.1a**). A widely known technique known as constrained projection $[G]$ (CP) (also called quadratic programming (QP)) performs the least squares multivariate regression whilst imposing normalization constraints on the regression coefficients, which allows the estimated coefficients to be directly interpreted as cell-type proportions within the sample^{31,38}. An alternative 'non-constrained' approach is to impose the non-negativity and normalization constraints after estimation of the regression coefficients. This is the approach taken by CIBERSORT, which implements a penalized multivariate regression, originally presented in the context of gene-expression data³⁷. A similar non-constrained approach can be taken with Robust Partial Correlations (RPC) (a robust form of multivariate regression)^{37,39}. A recent comparative DNAm study of CP, CIBERSORT and RPC concluded that for realistic noise levels, RPC and CIBERSORT might be preferable over CP³⁹, consistent with findings obtained on gene-expression data³⁷.

Methods such as CP or CIBERSORT use reference DNAm profiles defined as the average DNAm over biological replicates, using DMCs that maximize the differences in mean methylation between cell types. Ideally these DMCs would also exhibit very stable (i.e. ultra-low variance) DNAm profiles within cell-types, displaying as strongly bi-modal profiles. However, depending on the tissue and cell-types, such bi-modal DMCs may not be present, so the need may also arise to include the variance in DNAm when performing reference-based deconvolution. For instance, an algorithm called CancerLocator models reference DNAm profiles using beta distributions $[G]$, generating beta-distribution references for healthy plasma DNA and solid tumours, subsequently using a 2-state beta mixture model to infer tumour burden and tissue of origin of circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA) in plasma⁴⁰ (**Fig.1a**). Similarly, algorithms for inferring tumour purity of primary cancers also use explicit beta distributions and have been shown to provide accurate estimates, in line with gold-standard estimates derived from copy-number data⁴¹⁻⁴³.

[H3] Reference-free cell-type deconvolution. To date, there are two main types of reference-free methods (**Box 1**), which differ greatly in terms of their model assumptions. One class is widely known as Surrogate Variable Analysis **[G]** (SVA) ⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶, an approach developed originally for dealing with general unknown confounding factors and which has also gained considerable favour for cell-type deconvolution ⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹. SVA uses the phenotype of interest **[G]** (POI) from the outset, and attempts to construct ‘surrogate variables’ that capture confounding variation of any sort (i.e. not just cell-type compositional changes but e.g. also batch effects), in the space of variation that is ‘orthogonal’ to that associated with the POI ^{44,45,50}. A variant of SVA, called RefFreeEWAS ³², assumes an explicit mixture modelling structure (as required for modelling cell-type composition) and has been demonstrated to work well ^{32,51}. Another variant of SVA, called Independent Surrogate Variable Analysis (ISVA) ⁵⁰, is similar to SVA but uses a blind source separation **[G]** (BSS) algorithm (Independent Component Analysis **[G]** (ICA) ⁵²) instead of principal component analysis **[G]** (PCA) in the residual variation space, which may help to identify a more relevant subspace of confounding variation (i.e. a subset of surrogate variables). The need for this subspace selection step may arise if the model describing the effect of the POI on the data is a poor one, as this may result in variation associated with the POI being found in the surrogate variable subspace ⁵⁰. Unlike PCA, BSS is designed for disentangling independent sources of variation ⁵², and is therefore better suited for deconvolving the residual biological variation associated with the POI from potential confounding variation.

Another set of reference-free approaches, exemplified by methods such as EWASher ⁵³ or ReFACTor ⁵⁴, do not use the phenotype of interest when inferring latent components **[G]** associated with cell-type composition. This is only possible if certain assumptions are made. Specifically, EWASher and ReFACTor assume that the top principal component of variation in the data is associated with changes in cell-type composition, an assumption which will not hold if the phenotype of interest accounts for a larger proportion of data variance. Thus, the applicability of these two methods is critically dependent on the phenotype of interest and underlying tissue-type (**Fig.1b**). For instance, the assumption underlying EWASher and ReFACTor may hold in whole blood for a wide range of phenotypes, because the granulocyte proportion varies substantially, even among healthy individuals (see e.g. REF³⁹), yet in a less complex tissue such as peripheral blood, which is devoid of granulocytes, cell-type compositional changes could account for a much smaller proportion of total data variance. Similarly, in diseases such as cancer, which are characterized by large-scale changes in DNAm, involving most of the genome, only a relatively smaller fraction of these changes are due to changes in cell-type composition ^{48,55}. Thus, methods such as ReFACTor or EWASher may not offer the level of sensitivity required for many types of EWAS ⁴⁸.

[H3] Semi-reference-free cell-type deconvolution. A promising third paradigm, which however remains underexplored, can be viewed as semi-reference-free (**Box 1**). Conceptually, it adapts the Removing

Unwanted Variation (RUV) framework⁵⁶, in that it attempts to infer ‘empirical control features’, i.e. features affected by confounding variation but not associated with the POI, which can subsequently be used to adjust the data. In the context of cell-type deconvolution, a pre-specified set of cell-type specific DMCs (e.g. DMCs that differ between blood cell subtypes) could serve as empirical control features^{34,57}. A recent algorithm, called RefFreeCellMix, which uses a constrained form of non-negative matrix factorization (NMF), can be easily adapted in this semi-reference-free manner to infer cell-type proportions³³. By performing NMF on the reduced data matrix obtained by selecting cell-type specific DMCs, RefFreeCellMix can obtain estimates of cell-type fractions, from which DMCs associated with a POI can subsequently be inferred using supervised [G] regression. This approach was recently applied to the deconvolution of breast cancer samples (EDec algorithm)³⁴. More recently, a regularized version of RefFreeCellMix, called MeDeCom⁵⁸, which favours latent factors (representing cell-type specific DNAm profiles) that exhibit bi-modal (i.e. fully unmethylated or methylated) methylation states has been shown to lead to improved modeling of cell-type composition. All these algorithms also offer a means of identifying the specific cell types carrying the DNAm alterations, although this remains largely unexplored.

[H3] Comparison of cell-type deconvolution algorithms. For a given EWAS, the choice of cell-type deconvolution algorithm depends mainly on the availability of a suitable reference DNAm database. The database could be confounded by external factors such as age or genotype, rendering the references less useful for application to datasets where these factors might be very different (e.g. using adult blood cell subtype reference profiles to estimate cell subtype fractions in umbilical cord blood⁵⁹), or, reference profiles generated on purified cell populations may not capture important *in vivo* cell–cell interactions which are known to alter molecular profiles⁶⁰ (**Box 1**). Beyond these limitations, there are another three factors to consider when choosing a cell-type deconvolution method: first, the specific information desired (e.g. DMCs, cell-type fractions, or unsupervised discovery of novel cell-types); second, the presence of additional confounding factors, and whether these are known or unknown; and third, the POI and tissue type, which determines the relative data-variance associated with the POI and cell-type composition. Recommendations and guidelines for different scenarios are provided (see **Fig.1b**) and are largely in agreement with those of recent comparative studies^{47,48,49,61,62}. Briefly, for DMC detection in tissues for which the main underlying cell-types are known, reference-based methods, which are relatively assumption-free and which can be combined with batch-correction methods such as COMBAT⁶³, are recommended, unless confounders are unknown, in which case a method like SVA is preferable. Reference-free or semi-reference-free methods are necessary for tissues where no reference DNAm profiles are available. Because reference-free methods are more dependent on model assumptions, special care must be taken in selecting the most appropriate method, which will depend by and large on the relative data variance carried by the POI and cell-type composition,

and on the presence of unknown confounders (**Fig.1b**). For estimating cell-type fractions, a reference-based algorithm is most appropriate, although semi-reference-based algorithms such as RefFreeCellMix or MeDeCom could also be used if the inferred latent components are uniquely mappable to underlying cell-types³³. Finally, one may also wish to perform cell-type deconvolution in order to discover novel cell types in a tissue of interest. This unsupervised application would require application of methods such as RefFreeCellMix or MeDeCom on the full set of available CpGs, rather than on an informed subset of cell-type specific DMCs.

[H3] Epigenetic heterogeneity within cell types. Epigenetic heterogeneity also manifests itself within specific cell-types⁶⁴, notably pluripotent cells⁶⁵ and those of the immune system⁶⁶, but also within hematological cancers^{67,68} and the epithelial compartments of solid tumors^{55,69}. In the context of precursor cancer lesions, such epigenetic heterogeneity is believed to be an important driver of cancer risk, whereas in cancer, clonal heterogeneity determines disease progression and response to drug treatment⁶⁷. Thus, there is substantial interest in developing statistical measures that can quantify epigenetic clonal heterogeneity. Such quantification is best done using WGBS or RRBS data, because associated reads (representing strings of binary methylated/unmethylated calls at single-nucleotide resolution), have the required spatial resolution to allow epiallelic diversity to be estimated (**Fig.1c**). Of particular importance is also the detection of shifts in the proportions of specific epialleles, for which specific algorithms (e.g. methclone⁷⁰) have been developed. In the context of Illumina methylation beadarrays, epigenetic loci marking shifts in epigenetic subclones is possible using statistical tests for detecting methylation outliers⁵⁵.

[H1] Feature selection and interpretation

The most common task in omic-data analysis is feature selection. For any given EWAS, it is useful to think of CpG DNAm profiles as belonging to specific ‘families’, each characterized by a particular pattern or shape, and each linked to an underlying putative biological (or technical) factor. For instance, DNAm variation of CpGs marking specific cell types will typically exhibit patterns of DNAm variation that correlate linearly with the underlying cell-type fractions, whereas those driven by genetic variants will not. Given that current technologies allow measurement of DNAm in effectively a million to several million CpG sites, small differences in feature selection methods can have a dramatic impact on the specific ranking and selection of CpGs. An appreciation of the intricacies of feature selection is therefore critically important.

[H3] Variably methylated cytosines (VMCs). A popular unsupervised feature selection strategy is to rank and filter features by variance, or a robust version such as the median absolute deviation; the aim is to select the most variably methylated cytosines [G] (VMCs), whilst also removing those that exhibit little or no variance (which are assumed to represent noise)⁷¹. Applying this strategy to DNAm data could however bias the

selection of features, because DNAm data is usually quantified in terms of a beta value, which by construction is heteroscedastic [G]. In fact, for beta values, variance is maximal at a value of 0.5 ⁷², hence filtering by variance would favour genomic regions with intermediate mean levels of DNAm. Filtering tools that avoid this bias have been developed ⁷³. Alternatively, DNAm may be quantified in terms of M-values ⁷², which can be obtained directly from the log-ratio of intensities of methylated to unmethylated alleles, or from beta values by applying the logit transformation [G]. In principle, M-values are more homoscedastic, although care must be taken with features that have methylation beta values close to 0 or 1, as the logit transformation can turn these into significant outliers ^{72,74}.

In general, VMCs will exhibit a large range of DNAm values, and will include those driven by single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs). For a substantial number of these VMCs, the variation will be driven by a SNP affecting the interrogated cytosine (or another cytosine located within the probe body in the case of Illumina beadarrays), and such VMCs are normally removed during quality control ^{75,76}. For other VMCs, the SNP driving the variation will not be located at the interrogated cytosine (nor in the underlying probe), thus defining methylation quantitative trait loci [G] (mQTLs) (**Fig.2a**) ⁷⁷. Although mQTLs are highly variable, they are not always prominent features driving top components in a PCA, unless the study cohort consists of stratified (by ancestry) populations ^{18,77,78}. This is because principal components represent components of maximal *co-variation*, so that mQTLs (especially those with low minor allele frequencies) only account for relatively smaller fractions of data covariance. Other VMCs which will appear more prominently in top principal components may be associated with other biological factors such as cell-type composition (**Fig.2a**), or exhibit strongly bi-modal profiles such as those seen in cancer.

[H3] Differentially methylated cytosines (DMCs) and regions (DMRs). The most common supervised feature selection procedure is to select CpGs for which there is a significant difference in the average between phenotypes, defining DMCs (**Fig.2b**). The simplest method for selecting DMCs is that based on the absolute difference in mean beta values, which is analogous to the log-fold-change used in the gene expression context. However, because of the heteroscedasticity of beta values, such filtering may again bias selection against CpGs with very low or very high mean levels of methylation ⁷². A much safer option is to apply such thresholding on differences in mean beta value only after having ranked or selected features based on some formal statistic, as the statistic incorporates information about the spread of the data within phenotypes. One option is to use non-parametric Wilcoxon rank sum tests, as these only consider the relative ranking of beta values, although a caveat is that these tests are less powered. Another option is to use t-tests. Although t-tests require the data within the phenotypes being compared to be Gaussian distributed (an assumption not satisfied with beta-valued data), nevertheless, in practice, this does not impose any more of a limitation than the non-Gaussian nature of, for example, gene expression data from microarrays or RNA sequencing (RNA-

seq), for which empirical Bayes frameworks built on regularized t-statistics have proved extremely popular ⁷⁹⁻⁸¹. For feature selection, what matters is the distribution of values across samples, and for both DNAm and mRNA expression data, this distribution is approximately Gaussian. Confirming this, t-statistics and moderated t-statistics have been successfully applied to beta-valued data and shown to lead to very similar rankings compared to the application of the same statistics to M-values ⁷⁴. An important exception is when using Bayesian models, which are naturally more sensitive to underlying model assumptions (often Gaussian distributions). For instance, in small sample size studies, empirical Bayes models are necessary for obtaining improved estimates of variance, thus favouring M-values ^{72,74}. DMCs derived from t-tests or regularized t-tests may or may not exhibit large differences in average DNAm, since a CpG exhibiting a small (e.g. 5%) difference in mean methylation but with low variance within phenotypes may still have a large t-statistic. Many smoking-associated DMCs identified in whole blood are of this type ¹⁷. Cancer DMCs on the other hand generally exhibit much larger differences in mean DNAm (>30%, **Fig.2b**).

Differential methylation can also be called at the regional level. There are a number of reasons why identifying DMRs is desirable. First, due to the processivity of DNA methyltransferases and other enzymes modifying the epigenome, DNAm is generally highly correlated on scales up to about 500bp and beyond ^{16,82,83}. DNAm alterations associated with disease phenotypes and age typically also exhibit such spatially correlated patterns, albeit much weaker ¹⁶. Thus, calling DMRs removes some of the spatial redundancy, helping to reduce the dimensionality of the data. Second, calling differential methylation at the regional level may offer increased robustness, especially in the context of limited-coverage WGBS data ^{84,85}. Third, although still controversial, DNAm alterations that extend to the regional level are thought to be more functionally important than alterations that only affect isolated sites ^{86,87}. Statistical algorithms for calling DMRs include bump hunter ^{88,89}, an algorithm originally designed for high-resolution DNAm data (e.g. WGBS/CHARM ⁹⁰) but which has also been successfully adapted for Illumina Infinium beadchips and which can allow detection of small (~1–5kb) DMRs, as well as larger (~100kb–2Mb) DMRs, termed differentially methylated blocks (DMBs) ⁹¹⁻⁹⁶. A more recent algorithm tailored for WGBS data and which exploits the spatial correlation structure of DNAm, identifies regions of co-variation in methylation (COMETs) ^{84,85}, which can then be used as regional features for differential methylation analysis. Using COMETs to call differential methylation can result in over 40–50% improvements in sensitivity over DMC-calling, even in 30× coverage WGBS data ^{84,85}. Spatial correlation of methylation across different tissues and cell types has also been recently used to define ‘methylation haplotype blocks’, which facilitates the identification of the tissue of origin of ctDNA in serum ¹⁶. More recently adopted methods for identifying DMRs are DMRcate ⁹⁷ and Comb-p ⁹⁸. It is noteworthy that each DMR method differs in the assumptions made and statistical approach taken and therefore different methods very rarely identify precisely the same DMRs.

[H3] Differentially variable cytosines (DVCs) and regions (DVRs). An entirely different feature selection paradigm is based on features that exhibit differential variance in methylation between two phenotypes, so-called differentially variable cytosines [G] (DVCs). This approach computes the variance across samples belonging to the same phenotype and then compares this variance between two or more phenotypes using a statistical test for differential variance (**Box 2**)⁹⁹. It is important to appreciate that DVCs may not be DMCs (and vice-versa), and that there are also different types of DVCs (**Fig.2b**).

The importance of differential variance has been most clearly demonstrated in the context of early carcinogenesis^{69,100}, where differential variance between normal cells from healthy individuals and normal cells at risk of neoplastic transformation is critical to the identification of DNAm alterations that define field defects [G] in breast⁵⁵ and cervical cancer⁶⁹ (**Fig.2c**). These DNAm alterations are characterized by relatively large changes in DNAm (typically 20–30% or higher), defining outliers, and which occur predominantly, or exclusively, in the samples at risk of neoplastic transformation (**Fig.2c**). As might be expected from DNAm alterations in cells that have not yet undergone neoplastic transformation, these outlier events are relatively infrequent and exhibit a stochastic pattern⁵⁵. However, in cells that have undergone neoplastic transformation or turned invasive, the pattern of DNAm variation becomes more homogeneous and deterministic in the sense that effectively all (or most) cancer samples exhibit a difference in DNAm (**Fig.2c**). By combining differential-variance-based feature selection with an adaptive index classification algorithm¹⁰¹ in an approach called Epigenetic Variable Outliers for Risk prediction Analysis (EVORA)⁶⁹, such DVCs have been demonstrated to allow prediction of the prospective risk of cervical cancer (**Box 2**). A modification of EVORA, called iEVORA, which offers improved control of the type-1 error rate [G] was recently used to demonstrate the existence of DNAm field defects in the normal tissue adjacent to breast cancer⁵⁵. Given the growing importance of differential variance, a number of other algorithms^{102–104} have been proposed which offer an improved control of the type-1 error rate over the test implemented in EVORA. However, with a stricter control of the type-1 error rate, these other differential variance algorithms may also lack the sensitivity to detect DNAm alterations in precursor cancer lesions¹⁰⁵. Thus, their application appears limited to other phenotypes (e.g. neoplasia or invasive cancer).

An altogether different phenotype for which differential variance has recently been demonstrated to lead to novel insight is age⁷⁸. Specifically, the Breusch-Pagan test for heteroscedasticity was used to identify CpGs whose DNAm variability increases with age, identifying sites that are very different to those making up age-predictive epigenetic clocks^{8,106}, and which appear to be more relevant for understanding ageing mechanisms⁷⁸.

As with differential methylation, differential variance may also be defined at the regional level. First, it has been possible to demonstrate that there are genomic regions of increased DNAm variability, defining variably methylated regions [G] (VMRs)¹⁰⁷, also termed regions of high methylation disorder or entropy¹⁰⁸. Regions

that constitute VMRs in one phenotype (e.g. cancer) but not in another (e.g. normal tissue) define differentially variable regions [G] (DVRs) ¹⁰⁷. DVR detection is possible using dedicated functions in software packages such as *minfi* ⁸⁹ or *DMRcate* ⁹⁷, although the implemented differential variance tests are aimed at only controlling the type-1 error rate, and may thus be underpowered for detecting epigenetic field defects in cancer studies ⁵⁵.

[H3] Interpreting DNA methylation changes. Beyond cell-type composition ¹⁰⁹, observed DNAm alterations could be associated with deregulation of specific genes or signalling pathways in individual cell types ^{34,110}. Thus, there is a strong rationale for testing the enrichment of identified features for specific Gene Ontologies (GO) and signalling pathways. As multiple DMCs or DVCs may map to the same gene, it is critical to adjust for differential representation ¹¹¹ to avoid spurious over-representation in certain pathways by virtue of a higher probe or CpG density in those genes involved. This adjustment can be done with the *gometh/gseameth* algorithm ¹¹². An alternative approach is to assign a DNAm value to a given gene, for instance, by focusing on the average DNAm within a certain distance of the transcription start site (TSS)¹¹³, and then identifying differentially methylated genes, which can be subsequently fed into popular Gene Set Enrichment Analysis [G] (GSEA) methods ^{114,115}. With a DNAm value assigned to each gene, one may also perform differential methylation analysis at the level of signalling pathways, or search for differentially methylated gene modules (called ‘EpiMods’) within protein–protein interaction (PPI) networks ¹¹³. For instance, such an approach demonstrated that the WNT signalling pathway, a key developmental pathway, is a hotspot of age-associated DNAm deregulation ¹¹³.

[H1] Integration of DNAm with other omic data types

There are many factors that limit the interpretability of the DNAm data generated in a typical EWAS ^{116,117}. Besides cell-type heterogeneity, technical batch effects, genetic variation and reverse causation (i.e. alterations to measured DNAm levels caused by the phenotype itself) can also cause confounding ^{18,118}. As a predictor of gene expression, DNAm is also limited and outperformed by chromatin state information encoded by histone modification marks ^{119,120}. Thus, enhancing interpretability requires integration of EWAS data with other omic data types, including genotype or gene expression matched to the same samples for which DNAm is available.

[H3] Integration of DNAm with genotype. Total heritability of DNAm has been estimated at 20% ^{77,121}, with common SNPs accounting for approximately 37% of this heritability ⁷⁷. In line with this, many studies have demonstrated that mQTLs are widespread ^{77,122,123}, accounting for almost 40% of assayed CpG sites and

explaining about 20% of the inter-individual variation in DNAm, with environmental effects accounting for the remaining 80% ⁷⁷. Thus, adjusting for DNAm variation induced by genetic variation is a common procedure in EWAS, which can be achieved using PCA on the matched genotype data ^{77,78,124}, or directly from DNAm data if no matched genotype information is available ¹²⁵. Beyond being a source of confounding, genetically driven DNAm variation provides a useful resource for interrogating the functional role of DNAm variation in disease-associated loci. For example, functional inferences can be made by ascertaining whether disease-associated genetic variants from genome-wide association studies (GWAS) are also mQTLs (and may thus in part be influencing disease risk via epigenetic pathways), or by using genotype as a causal anchor to strengthen causal inference regarding the role of DNAm in mediating pathways to disease (**Box 3, Fig.3a**) ¹²⁶⁻¹²⁸. As a concrete example, genetic variants associated with blood lipid levels were used to demonstrate a causal effect of lipid levels on DNAm in blood, whereas mQTLs associated with lipid-level DMCs in blood excluded an effect in the reverse direction ¹¹⁸. Such inference can thus help to establish causal directionality in an EWAS of a disease risk factor, determining whether DNAm may mediate that risk.

[H3] Integration of DNAm with gene expression. The relationship between DNAm and gene expression is complex. From a modelling perspective, the first challenge is that it is not only the DNAm profile of the gene itself, but also the DNAm levels at distal regulatory elements, notably enhancers, that dictate the expression level of a gene. In the context of cancer, distal regulation by DNAm patterns at enhancers appears to account for more of the intertumor expression variation than corresponding DNAm changes at promoters ¹²⁹. However, expression variation should be assessed primarily against the normal tissue reference (which is often not done), and adjustment for cell-type heterogeneity is imperative as enhancers are among the most cell-type specific regions ^{110,130}. Then, there is the problem that most enhancers loop over their nearest genes to target genes much further away, causing uncertainty as to which genes an enhancer may regulate. Although improved statistical methods for linking enhancers to their putative gene targets are emerging ¹³¹, these still need further improvement. Focusing on the gene itself, a third challenge is to ascertain which part of a gene's DNAm profile is most predictive of its transcript level, as this may also depend on biological context and is still a matter of debate, with some studies suggesting gene body methylation levels as being more predictive than the more classical TSS region ¹³²⁻¹³⁴. However, a meta-analysis of human genome-wide methylation, expression and chromatin data has demonstrated that the relationship between gene-body methylation and gene expression is non-monotonic, with the lowest and highest expressed genes exhibiting the highest levels of gene body methylation ¹³⁵. This meta-analysis is consistent with other studies demonstrating that it is the TSS, first exon and 3' end that exhibit the strongest monotonic associations ^{87,136,137}. At the TSS and first exon the correlation is usually negative, characterized by a highly non-linear 'L'-shape function: i.e. methylated promoters are generally associated with gene silencing, whereas unmethylated promoters

associate with both transcribed and untranscribed states¹³⁸. Focusing on a specific predictive region such as the first exon or TSS allows assignment of a DNAm value to each gene, for instance by averaging DNAm values for CpGs in this region. The monotonic relation (be it linear or non-linear) between DNAm and transcription in these regions further facilitates subsequent integration with gene expression, or with other omic gene-level data (e.g. copy-number variants). Importantly, the procedure of assigning a DNAm value to a gene is a necessary preliminary step for integrative clustering analyses using tools such as iCluster+, which perform joint clustering of samples over a common set of features (usually genes) defined for different data types¹³⁹⁻¹⁴¹.

Other attempts at integration of DNAm and gene expression do not assign a unique DNAm value to a gene: instead they use information of the spatial shape of the DNAm profile over a gene (and beyond) as a predictor of gene expression^{86,87}. Such an approach requires DNAm data at high resolution (e.g. WGBS), to then perform unsupervised clustering of gene-based spatial DNAm profiles, typically centred on a 10–30kb window around the TSS of genes, and subsequently using special distance metrics to quantify the similarity of spatial DNAm profiles⁸⁶. This novel approach identified 4–5 spatially distinct DNAm shapes, each correlating with under or overexpression in *cis*⁸⁶, further confirming that DNAm patterns that extend well beyond the 5' and 3' ends of a gene are equally informative of gene expression^{15,110}. More recently, a supervised version of this spatial clustering method, which uses a Random Forest classifier, called ME-Class, has been shown to improve the prediction of gene expression, highlighting the importance of the TSS and 3' end as the most predictive gene regions⁸⁷.

[H3] System-level integration of DNAm. A powerful system-level integrative approach is to exploit the well-known association of DNAm at regulatory elements with transcription factor (TF) binding¹⁴²⁻¹⁴⁷ to infer patterns of regulatory activity in development and disease. Although DNAm at regulatory sites has traditionally been viewed as dictating TF binding affinity, the converse (i.e. DNAm levels at regulatory sites being a reflection of binding activity) is also frequently observed^{117,144}. Furthermore, whereas for most classes of TFs, DNAm inhibits or is inversely correlated with binding, there are other classes of TFs (e.g. those belonging to the homeodomain, POU and NFAT families) that prefer binding to methylated sequences¹⁴⁵. Thus, although the relationship between DNAm and TF binding is undoubtedly complex, two recent key observations have helped to spur a number of novel system-epigenomics [G] methods for inferring TF binding activity. One key observation is that tissue-specific TFs can be identified as those with an enrichment for unmethylated or relatively hypomethylated binding sites¹¹⁰. Although this was demonstrated by integrating WGBS and Encyclopedia of DNA Elements (ENCODE) ChIP-seq data across multiple different cell types¹¹⁰, other studies have shown that similar inferences are possible with lower resolution Infinium

methylation beadarrays⁹³. A second key observation is that integration of *trans*-mQTLs with *cis* expression quantitative trait loci [G] (*cis*-eQTLs) can reveal coordinated DNAm alterations at binding sites of a TF whose expression is altered by the SNP, thus providing also an important novel paradigm for elucidating the downstream effects of non-coding GWAS SNPs (**Fig.3b**)¹²⁴.

5 This inverse correlation between DNAm and regulatory element activity can be exploited by computational tools to infer disrupted regulatory networks associated with disease risk factors^{51,93,124,148} and disease itself^{129,149,150}. For instance, the Enhancer Linking by Methylation/Expression Relationships (ELMER) algorithm (**Table 1**)¹⁴⁹ begins by identifying enhancers (annotated by ENCODE and the Roadmap Epigenomics Mapping Consortium (RMEC)^{15,151}), whose DNAm levels are altered in cancer. It then uses the matched
10 mRNA expression of putative gene targets to construct cancer-specific enhancer–gene networks. ELMER subsequently uses TF-binding motif enrichment analysis for correlated enhancers and mRNA expression of enriched TFs to identify cancer-specific activated TFs. Other similar approaches such as Tracing Enhancer Networks using Epigenetic Traits (TENET)¹⁵² and RegNetDriver¹⁵³ have recently been proposed (**Table 1**). RegNetDriver constructs tissue-specific regulatory networks by integrating cell-type specific open chromatin
15 data with regulatory elements from ENCODE and RMEC, allowing active regulatory elements in a tissue to be identified. Mapping disease-associated molecular alterations in that tissue onto the corresponding tissue-specific network can reveal which TFs are deregulated in disease¹⁵³. All of these tools can lead to important novel hypotheses (e.g. ELMER identified RUNX1 as a key TF determining clinical outcome in kidney cancer), as well as novel insights (e.g. RegNetDriver revealed that most of the functional alterations of TFs in
20 prostate cancer were associated with DNAm changes but that TF hubs [G] were preferentially altered at the copy-number level). However, obvious limitations remain: the set of enhancer regions used are usually not cell-type specific or were generated in unrepresentative cell-line models, while linking genes to enhancers and vice versa is challenging as most enhancers skip their nearest promoter to link to genes that are much further away (contact distances can range from 40kb to 3Mb with a median distance of ~180kb^{154,155}).
25 Although tools like ELMER and TENET use correlations between enhancer DNAm and mRNA target expression to hone in on the more likely targets, these correlations are themselves subject to potential confounders such as cell-type heterogeneity.

Another valuable system-level integrative strategy, exemplified by the Functional Epigenetic Modules (FEM) algorithm (**Table 1**), has been to integrate DNAm and gene expression data in the context of a gene function
30 network, for instance a PPI network, to identify hotspots (gene modules) where there is significant epigenetic deregulation in relation to some phenotype of interest (**Fig.3c**)^{136,156}. There are two main reasons why integration of DNAm with a PPI network is meaningful. First, PPI networks encode information about which proteins interact together and which are therefore more likely to be co-expressed as part of a common biological process or signalling pathway. This co-expression is likely to be under epigenetic control, and

therefore potentially measurable from DNAm patterns at the corresponding genes ¹¹³. Indeed, like gene expression, DNAm also exhibits modularity in the context of a PPI network, whereby promoter DNAm levels of genes whose proteins interact are on average more highly correlated than those of non-interacting proteins (**Fig.3c**) ¹¹³. Second, using a functional network from the outset and searching for subnetworks where there is simultaneous differential methylation and differential expression can help to identify biological pathways or processes that are epigenetically deregulated, which in turn may lead to novel insight. This is not dissimilar to performing a direct form of GSEA, but using a network instead of an external database of biological terms. Similar supervised functional network algorithms have been extensively applied in the gene expression context, leading to important novel insights ¹⁵⁷⁻¹⁵⁹. As an example of the insights gained using FEM, it successfully identified two separate gene modules with the main targets of epigenetic silencing mapping to a target (*HAND2*) and co-activator (*TGFBIII*) of the progesterone receptor, a key tumour suppressor pathway for which inactivation is thought to contribute causally to the development of endometrial cancer ^{156 136}. More recently, other algorithms that extend or modify FEM have been proposed (**Table 1**) ^{160,161}. The algorithm Significance-based Modules Integrating the Transcriptome and Epigenome (SMITE) ¹⁶² can identify DNAm-mediated altered cellular states (e.g. gene modules) without the need for direct integration with a PPI network, thus allowing a larger gene-space to be explored. In summary, although these methods can significantly improve the interpretation of DNAm changes in EWAS, they are nevertheless limited by the quality of the modelling between methylation and gene expression.

Another set of integrative algorithms are tailored for integrating DNAm data that is generated in conjunction with other data types for the same samples: for instance, this may include mutations, copy-number variants (CNVs), mRNA, microRNAs (miRNAs) and protein expression ¹⁶³. Analysing individual data types separately and subsequently correlating resulting clusters has been a popular strategy ¹⁶⁴, yet performing simultaneous inference using all data types together offers, in principle, a much more powerful and unbiased framework in which to identify system-level associations and extract novel biological insight. For instance, simultaneous inference may help to identify genes that are deregulated epigenetically or through CNVs in a mutually exclusive fashion ^{153,165}. Although many statistical algorithms for multi-omic integrative analyses exist, their application to multi-omic data remains challenging, due to the high-dimensional nature of the data, but also because the effect of confounders on the inference is poorly understood. So far, a joint NMF algorithm was applied to the matched DNAm, mRNA and miRNA expression data sets for ovarian cancer from The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA), revealing novel perturbed pathways ¹⁶⁶. An integrative DNAm and mRNA analysis of oestrogen receptor (ER)⁺ breast cancer used a joint latent variable algorithm, called iCluster/iCluster+ ^{139,141,167}, demonstrating that ER⁺ breast cancer transcriptomic subtypes differ epigenetically mainly only in terms of the level of DNAm deregulation ¹⁴⁰. Other algorithms and techniques for joint multi-omic matrix factorization analyses are available, yet remain largely unexplored in a DNAm

context. For instance, Joint and Individual Variation Explained (JIVE) (**Table 1**) is a powerful multi-dimensional matrix factorization algorithm, which can identify sources of data variation that are common to multiple data types, as well as those that are unique to each data type^{168,169}. If multi-omic data is matched across all dimensions (e.g. the same genes and samples measured for two different tissue or data types), it can be packed into a multi-dimensional array known as a tensor **[G]**, for which non-Bayesian (Parallel Factor Analysis (PARAFAC)¹⁷⁰) and Bayesian (Sparse Decomposition Analysis (SDA)¹⁷¹) tensorial decomposition algorithms are available (**Table 1**). By approximating the data tensor as a sum of products of simple latent component vectors, one for each data type, these models are readily interpretable, with the Bayesian version less prone to overfit. A recent study applied SDA to an order-3 tensor of expression values defined over 20,000 genes, 845 individuals and 3 tissue-types (skin, adipose and lymphoblasts), subsequently correlating the latent components to SNPs and revealing *trans*-eQTL gene networks that were either common or unique to different tissue types, thus helping delineate tissue-specific functional effects of GWAS SNPs¹⁷¹. Thus, tensorial methods should also be particularly suitable for elucidating tissue-specific and tissue-independent mQTLs in EWAS profiling multiple tissue-types.

Conclusions and future directions

Recent studies underline the importance of DNAm as a focal point for elucidating and understanding diverse phenomena, including ageing phenotypes^{8,78,172-174}, functional effects of GWAS variants^{30,175}, the causal pathways between environmental factors and disease risk^{18,51,156,176-178}, cell-type heterogeneity and stochasticity^{64,69,178,179}, cancer evolution and metastasis^{67,68,70,180,181} and 3D chromatin architecture^{108,182}. Furthermore, they highlight potential downstream applications, including cancer risk prediction^{69,183,184}, prediction of frailty and all-cause mortality¹⁸⁵⁻¹⁸⁷ and non-invasive detection of cancer and tissue of origin from ctDNA in blood plasma^{16,40,188}. For many of these efforts, cell-type heterogeneity and deconvolution will continue to pose an outstanding challenge. Indeed, most of the algorithms for systems-level integration that compute correlations between features do not adjust for cell-type heterogeneity, yet this adjustment is paramount for correct interpretability. Another outstanding challenge is that current algorithms do not allow for the identification of the specific cell type (or types) carrying the DMCs, thus requiring laborious follow-up experimental validation in purified samples. The potential limitation of cell-cell interactions on the accuracy of reference profiles used in reference-based inference also needs to be assessed. Hybrid approaches that generate reference DNAm (or RNA-seq) profiles for different single cell types in a small number of individuals could be a fruitful strategy for constructing improved reference profiles that are tailored to the tissue of interest¹⁸⁹. Ultimately, the level of resolution required by cell-type deconvolution strategies also needs to be determined, as epigenetic and DNAm heterogeneity exists right down to the single-cell level¹⁹⁰. Thus, quantification of functional epigenetic heterogeneity will be a key problem for the future. Related to

this, it is also unclear whether DNAm or mRNA expression are better suited for cell-type deconvolution^{26,34,37}, and whether joint analysis of data types could further improve inference. The generation of gold-standard datasets, artificial and real, is challenging, yet absolutely necessary to ensure objective comparisons of existing and upcoming statistical algorithms⁴⁸. In particular, a large comparative and comprehensive analysis of cell-type deconvolution algorithms, including novel semi-reference-free methods which are particularly amenable for Bayesian treatment, is urgently needed.

Feature selection and inference of causality in EWAS also remains a considerable challenge, even when adjustment for cell-type heterogeneity is possible, as features may still be susceptible to reverse causation or confounding by other unknown factors. Longitudinal prospective studies can avoid some reverse causation effects, and using genotype as a causal anchor via Mendelian randomization [G], can further help to exclude the effects of confounders, yet all this does not currently provide a panacea to the problem. Causal inference methods often rely on model assumptions (e.g. linearity) that may not hold, and that may lead to residual confounding and to wrong or conflicting conclusions. Measurement errors, for instance in epidemiological variables, further exacerbate this problem. Thus, as recently proposed¹¹⁷, causal inference methods may need to incorporate prior biological information from the outset in order to strengthen inference: for instance, guided by recent studies demonstrating that *trans*-mQTLs at transcription factor binding sites could help to delineate the effects of non-coding GWAS SNPs¹²⁴, it will be of great interest to extend causal-inference methodology to such multi-locus scenarios. Alternatively, breakthrough experimental techniques that allow single- and multi-locus epigenome editing¹⁹¹ will shed new light on epigenetic function and causality, yet these will also require the development of novel statistical procedures to fully interpret the effects of epigenetic perturbations. Another emerging challenge for feature selection is the presence of stochastic epigenetic perturbations, exemplified by DNAm outliers in normal tissue that predate disease onset and that may be indicators of disease risk (e.g. normal tissue at risk of cancer development)⁵⁵. A particular challenge is distinguishing DNAm outliers that mark shifts in the epiallele composition of a tissue (contributing to epigenetic mosaicism), from DNAm outliers driven by technical or other confounders.

More generally, analysing DNAm in conjunction with other epigenetic and functional data promises to improve our understanding of ‘System Epigenomics’. However, this will require sophisticated statistical modelling, which could benefit from harnessing innovative approaches used in other fields, such as engineering, artificial intelligence and physics. Although the value of advanced machine learning methods (e.g. deep neural networks) is undeniable^{15,131,192,193}, extracting novel biological insight from them is often limited. Thus, we envisage that phenomenological models inspired or built on physical models¹⁹⁴⁻¹⁹⁷ could capture the right level of complexity to extract and harness useful biological insight. Along these lines, integrative analysis of multi-omic data, potentially at the single-cell level and within the framework of statistical mechanics models^{190,195,198-202}, may allow construction of epigenetic landscapes as envisaged by

Waddington^{108,197}, which in turn may help to elucidate system-biological principles underlying diverse phenomena such as tissue homeostasis and cancer.

The rapid growth and availability of statistical tools to integrate, analyse and make inferences about DNAm data is encouraging. Such developments continue to address the challenges faced by the field and fundamental to these developments is an understanding of both the statistical characteristics of the data being used as well as the biological phenomena they represent.

10 [Copy Ed: for boxes 1 & 3, please apply bullet point style for the bulleted parts]

Box 1 | Statistical paradigms for cell-type deconvolution

15 [b1] Reference-based cell-type deconvolution tools

These methods are statistical inference paradigms that correct for cell-type heterogeneity by using an existing reference DNA methylation (DNAm) database of cell types that are thought to be present in the tissue of interest. If the main underlying cell types of the tissue are known, then estimates of the absolute cell-type fractions is possible, otherwise estimated fractions are relative. The estimated absolute or relative cell-type fractions can then be used as covariates in supervised multivariate regression models to infer DMCs that are independent of changes in cell-type composition.

20 [b2] Advantages

- Estimation of absolute or relative cell-type fractions in each individual sample.
- If required, they can be easily combined with batch-correction methods such as COMBAT.
- The model itself is relatively assumption free.

25 [b2] Disadvantages

- The tools require knowledge of main cell types that are present in the tissue.
- ,Reliable reference DNAm profiles must be available for these cell-types.
- On their own they cannot deal with unknown confounding factors.
- They assume that cell–cell interactions in the sample do not affect the DNAm profiles of the individual cell-types.
- Reference profiles could be confounded by age or genotype.

35 [b1] Reference-free cell-type deconvolution tools

These methods correct for cell-type heterogeneity by inferring from the full data matrix ‘surrogate variables’, which represent sources of data variation that are driven by cell-type composition. These surrogate variables are inferred from the data without the need for a reference DNAm database, and are used as covariates in the final supervised multivariate regression model to infer differentially methylated cytosines (DMCs) that are independent of changes in cell-type composition.

40 [b2] Advantages

- No requirement to know the main cell types in a tissue, or to have reference DNAm profiles, hence in principle they are applicable to any tissue-type.
- De-novo (unsupervised) discovery of novel cell subtypes.
- They allow for the possibility that cell–cell interactions alter the profiles of individual cell types.
- They can adjust simultaneously for other confounding factors, known or unknown.

45 [b2] Disadvantages

- Without further biological input, they cannot provide estimates of cell-type fractions in individual samples.

- Performance is strongly dependent on model assumptions, which are often not satisfied.

[b1] Semi reference-free cell-type deconvolution tools

A third paradigm, which corrects for cell-type heterogeneity by inferring surrogate variables representing variation due to cell-type composition, but which unlike a purely ‘reference-free’ approach, does so by using partial prior biological knowledge of which CpGs differ between cell types. Typically, they infer the surrogate variables from the reduced data matrix, projected on this set of selected features.

[b2] Advantages

- They allow for the possibility that cell–cell interactions alter the DNAm profiles of individual cell types.
- If required, they can be combined with batch-correction methods such as COMBAT.
- They are more robust to incomplete knowledge of underlying cell types in tissue of interest.
- They can provide approximate relative estimates of cell-type fractions in individual samples.

[b2] Disadvantages

- Performance is still strongly dependent on model assumptions, which may not be satisfied.
- Inference of absolute cell-type fractions in individual samples remains challenging.
- The ability to resolve highly similar cell types is limited.

Box 2 | Differential variability: a novel feature-selection paradigm

[b1] Differential Variance

Differential Variance (DV) is a novel statistical paradigm for feature selection that has been shown to be valuable in studies seeking DNA methylation (DNAm) field defects, i.e. DNAm alterations that appear in the normal cell of origin of epithelial cancers and that become enriched in cancer. A test for DV identifies CpGs for which the variance in DNAm differs significantly between phenotypes, defining differentially variable cytosines (DVCs). Hypervariable DVCs exhibit increased variance (conversely, hypovariable DVCs exhibit decreased variance) in the disease phenotype compared to normal controls. Depending on the specific test for DV, DVCs typically contain varying numbers of outliers, which occur exclusively or predominantly in one phenotype. DVCs may also exhibit ultra-stable (i.e. very low variance) DNAm in one phenotype, but not in the other.

[b1] Statistical tests for DV

[b2] Bartlett’s test. A test that assumes normality for each of two underlying distributions being compared and which is therefore sensitive to outliers. Although it suffers from a high type-1 error rate, its sensitivity to outliers (i.e. deviations from normality) makes it an attractive choice because in precursor cancer lesions DNAm outliers have been shown to be biologically relevant. This test is used in Epigenetic Variable Outliers for Risk prediction Analysis (EVORA) and iEVORA and was instrumental for identifying DNAm field defects in cervical and breast cancer (Table 1).

[b2] The Levene and Brown–Forsythe tests. Levene’s test compares the absolute spread of values from the mean in each group, using a one-way ANOVA F-test, whereas the Brown–Forsythe test uses the median instead of the mean, rendering it more robust. Both tests are less sensitive to departures from normality than Bartlett’s test. Levene’s test is implemented in the DiffVar package (Table 1).

[b2] Breusch–Pagan test. A test for heteroscedasticity or differential variability in a response variable (here DNAm) as a function of a continuously valued independent variable (e.g. age). It works by correlating the residuals of a linear regression of the response variable against the independent variable, to the independent variable. This test has been used to identify CpGs exhibiting age-associated increases in DNAm variance (see the main text).

[b1] EVORA

EVORA is a statistical framework that uses differential variability in DNAm to identify CpGs that exhibit outlier DNAm values in normal cells that are at risk of neoplastic transformation compared to normal cells that are not at risk. For a given risk marker CpG it assumes that DNAm outliers may exhibit stochasticity, i.e. they define infrequent events across independent samples. Feature selection using DV is combined with an adaptive index classification algorithm (effectively, a counting scheme for the number of outliers in a sample) to construct a risk score.

Box 3 | Statistical approaches for establishing mediation by DNA methylation

DNA methylation (DNAm) is a molecular phenotype that is influenced by endogenous and exogenous factors as well as disease processes themselves, and this presents challenges in understanding the correlations between measures of interest. A variety of statistical methods have been applied to dissect causal relationships and to construct causal pathways involving molecular intermediates including DNAm. These methods have only been applied to differentially methylated cytosines (DMCs) and have yet to be extended to consider the mediating role of differentially methylated regions (DMRs).

[b1] Exposure–outcome mediation

The most commonly applied approach in epidemiology is a regression-based method originally proposed by Baron and Kenny²⁰³ that aims to distinguish the degree of mediation of an exposure (E) on an outcome (Y) by an intermediate (M). The Sobel test is applied to ascertain whether the effect of E on Y is statistically significant once adjusted for M.

[b2] Advantages

- It is simple to administer.
- The proportion of mediation can be quantified.

[b2] Disadvantages

- It requires strong assumptions that are often violated when applying to molecular mediators. These assumptions include: (i) Y and M are continuous, and (ii) there is no measurement error in the mediator.
- This method should only be applied in the context of complete (not partial) mediation, which is usually not the case when considering DNAm.

Other, more flexible methods have been applied to DNAm data including linear equations, structural equation models, marginal structural models and G-computation; however, these approaches all require assumptions of no measurement error and no unmeasured confounding, which are violated in analyses involving DNAm.

[b1] Causal inference test (CIT)

This popular approach for exploring causal links in DNAm analyses uses genetic variation as a causal anchor. It is analogous to the Baron and Kenny approach in its use of a series of regression analyses to establish mediated effects but uses genotype (G) in place of the exposure (E). This approach has been used to infer the causal effect of methylation quantitative trait loci (mQTLs) on a particular outcome³⁰.

[b2] Advantages

- It avoids confounding and reverse causation in the mediator–outcome relationship by using genotype as a causal anchor.
- It is simple to apply.

[b2] Disadvantages

- It relies on a *P*-value to determine the causal effect and does not estimate the magnitude of the mediated effect.
- It is vulnerable to measurement error in the mediator or outcome.
- It cannot differentiate between a mediated effect and a situation in which the genetic variant directly effects the outcome via an alternative biological pathway (pleiotropy [G]).

[b1] Mendelian randomization (MR)

This form of instrumental variables (IV) analysis makes use of genetic variants that are robustly associated with the exposure (E) or mediator (M) of interest. It can also be applied in the reciprocal direction to evaluate the direction of cause from a postulated outcome (Y) on the apparent exposure or mediator. The assumptions of MR are detailed at length elsewhere²⁰⁴. Its application in the context of DNAm is becoming more widespread^{118,205-207} and an automated platform for MR analysis is openly available (<http://www.mrbase.org/>) to facilitate this (see **Table 1**).

[b2] Advantages

- It provides an estimate of the magnitude of the mediated effect.
- It overcomes the issue of measurement error in the mediator because genotype is usually measured accurately.
- It is readily applicable through online tools.

[b2] Disadvantages

- It is reliant on the identification of *cis*-mQTLs to tag the differentially methylated site of interest
- It has low power, which necessitates the use of large sample sizes.
- The potential pleiotropy of genetic variants, although strategies can be adopted to counter this limitation^{208,209}.

Figure legends

Figure 1| **DNA methylation analysis of cell-type heterogeneity. a** | 1. Estimating cell-type fractions in a sample for which a genome-wide DNA methylation (DNAm) profile is available is an important task as changes in these proportions can have biological and clinical importance, or can confound analyses. Constrained projection (CP) infers these proportions by running a constrained multivariate regression model of the sample's DNAm profile against reference DNAm profiles for the cell types of interest, with the estimated regression coefficients (w_1, w_2, w_3) representing cell proportions. 2. Estimating the relative fractions of healthy cell-free DNA (cfDNA) and circulating tumour DNA (ctDNA) in plasma presents a novel promising clinical application for non-invasive early detection and disease monitoring. The CancerLocator algorithm (Table 1) allows estimation of the tumour burden (denoted f) and the type of tumour. **b** | Cell-type heterogeneity may cause confounding and compromise the identification of differentially methylated cytosines (DMCs) in epigenome-wide association studies (EWAS). The diagram presents recommendations as to which statistical algorithms might be better suited for different EWAS scenarios. This depends on whether reference DNAm profiles are available, the presence of unknown confounders and technical batch effects. When reference profiles are available, reference-based methods are recommended unless there is evidence for other confounding variation in which case Surrogate Variable Analysis (SVA)-like methods are preferable. If partial prior information is available e.g. if cell-type specific DMCs (denoted tDMCs) are known but no reference profiles are available, a semi-reference free approach such as RefFreeCellMix is recommended. Relative data variation between phenotype of interest (POI) and that due to cell-type heterogeneity is important when deciding between reference-free methods. Finally, DMCs are inferred using a multivariate regression of the data against the POI (F denotes the link function) and cell-type fractions or surrogate variables as covariates (denoted Q). Note that regression coefficients have been omitted for sake of clarity. **c** | A third important task is the quantification of epigenetic heterogeneity within a given cell-type, for instance, quantifying clonal heterogeneity within tumour cells. Given that DNAm normally exhibits strong spatial correlations on scales up to about 500bp, and given that tumours are characterized by widespread deviations from the DNAm ground state, one approximate way to estimate clonal epigenetic heterogeneity is to measure the proportion of discordant reads (PDR). Tumours characterized by high epigenetic clonal heterogeneity have been found to exhibit worse clinical outcome (see the main text).

CR, concordant reads;

ISVA, Independent Surrogate Variable Analysis;
 PBMC, peripheral blood mononuclear cells;
 RPC, Robust Partial Correlations;
 RUV, Removing Unwanted Variation;
 tDMCs, cell-type-specific DMCs.

Figure 2 | **Variability, differential means and differential variability in DNAm data. a** |

Two examples of variably methylated cytosines (VMCs), one driven by single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) located in *cis* with the indicated CpG (defining a well-known *cis* methylation quantitative trait locus (*cis*-mQTL), (left panel), and another driven by variation in immune-cell contamination (right panel). Both profiles of CpG DNA methylation (DNAm) derive from an Illumina Infinium DNAm dataset encompassing 152 normal cervical smear samples⁶⁹. For the mQTL, samples are grouped according to the predicted genotype. For the other VMC, blue denotes normal cervical smears from women who 3 years after sample collection developed a cervical intraepithelial neoplasia of grade 2 or higher (CIN2+), whereas green denotes normal cervical smears from women who remained healthy. This particular VMC is unmethylated in all white blood cells (WBC) but not in cervical epithelial cells and so the variation in the cervical smear is due to variation in WBC contamination. Panels illustrate how SNPs and cell-type composition can drive large variation in DNAm, but variation which may not correlate with case versus control status. **b** | Contrast between differentially methylated cytosines (DMCs) and differentially variable cytosines (DVCs). Two examples of each are given, drawn from Illumina Infinium DNAm data of normal cervical smears and either cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN2+) or cervical cancer. The average levels are shown as horizontal dashed lines. Observe how a DVC is characterized by a very stable DNAm profile in one phenotype, but with DNAm outliers driving large variation in the other. By contrast, a DMC is typically characterized by most samples in one phenotype exhibiting a deviation in DNAm value. **c** | Example of a CpG that exhibits progression in DNAm between successive stages in cervical carcinogenesis. When comparing normal cervical smears that progress to CIN2+ (Normal→CIN2+) to those which do not (Normal→Normal), this CpG can only be identified (i.e. *P*-value is highly significant) via a test for differential variance (or for deviation from normality) such as Bartlett's test. When comparing CIN2+ to normal cervical smears, differential variance is still the main distinguishing feature. Only when comparing (invasive) cervical cancer to normal cervix does this CpG exhibit a stronger difference in average DNAm, and therefore can be identified using e.g. t-tests or Wilcoxon tests. Thus, this panel illustrates how the DNAm profile of the same CpG changes during cervical carcinogenesis and emphasizes the importance of selecting the appropriate statistical test, as the choice of test will have a dramatic impact on feature selection. All data shown represent real DNAm data derived from REF⁶⁹, with the corresponding CpG identifiers given above each panel.

Figure 3 | **Examples of system-level integrative analysis of DNAm data. a** | To establish causal pathways for observed associations between an exposure, mediator and outcome (Panel-1), genotype can be used as a causal anchor. To strengthen causal inference from exposure to outcome and from exposure to mediator, a genetic variant, G1 (or combination of multiple variants) that robustly correlate with the exposure can be used (Panel-2). Solid lines represent the established association of the instrumental variable (single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP)) with the factor for which it is acting as a proxy and the dashed lines represent the relationships being tested in the Mendelian randomization (MR) framework. The association of G1 with the outcome (and mediator) provides evidence of a causal impact of the exposure on these factors. When considering the causal pathway from the mediator (DNA methylation (DNAm)) to the outcome, a second genetic variant G2 (or combination of multiple variants) can be used. G2 is a methylation quantitative trait locus (mQTL) that robustly correlates with the DNAm site of interest (Panel-3). Details of the statistical methods to implement this MR approach are further described in Box 3. G1 and G2 analyses can, if desired, be conducted in entirely different sample sets and causal inference

remains valid. An application of this conceptual framework is shown in Panels 4-6 where the exposure–outcome setting is smoking and lung cancer and the proposed mediator is DNAm at the *AHRR* gene locus. SNPs at the *CHRNA* locus are an established proxy for smoking heaviness and have been used in an MR framework. Their application here can corroborate established evidence for the causal role of smoking on lung cancer as well as interrogate the causal role for methylation as a mediating mechanism. **b** | Integration of DNAm data with matched SNPs and mRNA expression can be used to elucidate the role of genome-wide association study (GWAS) SNPs. For instance, a genetic variant defining a *cis* expression QTL (*cis*-eQTL) for a transcription factor (TF) can be found to be associated with a large number of *trans*-mQTLs. For *cis*-eQTLs associated with increased TF activity, these *trans*-mQTLs exhibit a skew towards hypomethylation (loss of methylation is indicated by the transition C^m (methylated cytosine) to C (cytosine)), are enriched for binding sites of this TF and for *cis* expression quantitative trait methylation loci **[G]** (*cis*-eQTMs) defined by the corresponding TF gene targets. An example of a SNP associated with ulcerative colitis illustrates how relevant disrupted pathways can be identified¹²⁴. **c** | Like mRNA expression, promoter DNAm exhibits modularity, i.e stronger correlations between genes that interact in a gene-functional network (e.g. a protein–protein interaction (PPI) network). This modularity and the association between promoter DNAm and mRNA expression can be exploited to identify gene modules that are significantly deregulated at both transcriptomic and epigenetic levels. The Functional Epigenetic Modules (FEM) algorithm (Table 1) can be used to identify such hotspots of deregulation. A successful application of FEM to endometrial cancer uncovered the *HAND2* gene, a target of the progesterone receptor, which is hypermethylated and silenced in pre-neoplastic lesions and in cancer, and which has been shown to drive endometrial carcinogenesis^{156 136}. Another gene module centred around *TGFB111* (also known as *HIC5*), a known co-activator of the progesterone receptor. Part c is adapted from ref 210.

Table 1 | **Algorithms and software for downstream statistical analyses of DNA methylation data**

Name	Description	Programming language	Web links	Reference
Cell-type deconvolution algorithms				
CP/QP	Reference-based method using constrained projection	R	github.com/sjczheng/EpiDISH	Houseman et al ³¹
RPC	Reference-based Robust Partial Correlations	R	github.com/sjczheng/EpiDISH	Teschendorff et al ³⁹
CIBERSORT	Reference-based Support Vector Regressions	R	github.com/sjczheng/EpiDISH	Newman et al ³⁷
SVA	Surrogate Variable Analysis (reference-free)	R	www.bioconductor.org sva package	Leek et al ⁴⁴
ISVA	Independent Surrogate Variable Analysis (reference-free)	R	https://cran.r-project.org/package=isva	Teschendorff et al ⁵⁰
RefFreeEWAS	Reference-free deconvolution	R	https://cran-r-project.org/package=RefFreeEWAS	Houseman et al ³²
RefFreeCellMix	(Semi)-reference-free NMF using recursive QP	R	https://cran-r-project.org/package=RefFreeEWAS	Houseman et al ³³
MeDeCom	(Semi)-reference-free constrained and regularized NMF	R	http://github.com/lutsik/MeDeCom	Lutsik et al ⁵⁸
EDec	Like RefFreeCellMix but applied to breast cancer/tissue	R	https://github.com/BRL-BCM/EDec	Onuchic et al ³⁴
RUV/RUVm	Removing Unwanted Variation	R	http://www.bioconductor.org missMethyl package	Gagnon-Bartsch et al ⁵⁶ Maksimovic et al ²¹⁰
CancerLocator	Inference of tumour burden and tissue of origin from plasma cfDNA	Java	https://github.com/jasminezhoulab	Kang et al ⁴⁰
MethylPurify	Tumour purity estimation from WGBS	Python	https://pypi.python.org/pypi/MethylPurify	Zheng X et al ⁴¹

	or RRBS data			
InfiniumPurify	Tumour purity estimation from Illumina Infinium data	Python	https://bitbucket.org/zhengxiaoqi/	Zhang et al ⁴²
Algorithms for feature selection				
BSSeq & BSmooth	DMR finder	R	http://www.bioconductor.org/bsseq package	Hansen et al ²¹¹
Bumphunter (minfi)	DMR finder	R	http://www.bioconductor.org/minfi package	Jaffe et al ⁸⁸ & Aryee et al ⁸⁹
DMRcate	DMR finder	R	http://www.bioconductor.org	Peters et al ⁹⁷
COMETgazer/COMETvintage	Regions of co-methylation and DMC/DMRs	C++ & R	https://github.com/rifathamoudi/COMETgazer https://github.com/rifathamoudi/COMETvintage	Libertini et al ⁸⁵
EVORA/iEVORA	Differentially Variable CpGs	R	https://cran.r-project.org/package=evora	Teschendorff et al ^{55,69,100,105}
DiffVar	Differentially Variable CpGs	R	www.bioconductor.org/missMethyl package	Phipson et al ¹⁰²
GALMSS	Generalized Additive Linear Model for location, scale and shape	R	https://cran.r-project.org/package=gamlss	Wahl et al ¹⁰³
GSEA, pathway, integrative and system-level analysis				
Gometh/gseameth (missMethyl)	Gene Ontology and Gene Set Enrichment Analysis	R	http://www.bioconductor.org/missMethyl package	Phipson et al ¹¹²
extractAB (minfi)	Estimation of open/closed chromatin regions	R	http://www.bioconductor.org/minfi package	Fortin et al ¹⁸²
FEM/EpiMods	Functional Epigenetic Modules (DNAm and mRNA)	R	http://www.bioconductor.org/FEM package	Jiao et al ¹³⁶
SMITE	Significance-based Modules Integrating Transcriptome and Epigenome	R	http://www.bioconductor.org/SMITE package	Wijetunga et al ¹⁶²
ME-Class	Methylation-based Expression Classification & Prediction	Python	https://github.com/cschlosberg/me-class	Schlosberg et al ⁸⁷

ELMER	Enhancer Linking by Methylation/Expression Relationships	R	http://www.bioconductor.org/ELMER package	Yao et al ¹⁴⁹
TENET	Tracing Enhancer Networks using Epigenetic Traits	R	http://farnhamlab.com/software http://www.bioconductor.org/TENET package	Rhie et al ¹⁵²
TEPIC	Integration of open-chromatin data (e.g. NOMe-Seq, DHS) to predict gene expression	Python/C++	https://github.com/schulzlab/TEPIC	Schmidt et al ²¹²
iCluster/iCluster+	Integrative Clustering	R	http://www.bioconductor.org/iClusterPlus package	Shen et al ¹³⁹
PARAFAC (multiway)	Parallel Factor Analysis / Non-Bayesian Tensor Decomposition	R	https://cran.r-project.org/package=multiway	Harshman et al ¹⁷⁰
SDA	Sparse Decomposition Analysis / Bayesian Tensor Decomposition	Linux executable	https://jmarchini.org/sda	Hore et al ¹⁷¹
JIVE	Joint and Individual Variation Explained	R	https://cran.r-project.org/package=r.jive	O'Connell et al ¹⁶⁸
Methods for causality inference				
MR-Base	An analytical platform that uses curated GWAS data to perform Mendelian randomization tests and sensitivity analyses	R	http://www.mrbase.org	Hemani et al ²¹⁴ http://biorxiv.org/content/early/2016/12/16/078972
JLIM	Joint Likelihood Mapping	R	http://www.github.com/cotsapaslab/jlim/	Chun et al ²¹³
Bayesian coloc	Bayesian test for Colocalization	R	https://cran.r-project.org/package=coloc	Giambartolomei et al ²¹⁴
gwas-pw	Joint analysis of GWAS signals	R	https://github.com/joepickrell/gwas-pw	Pickrell et al ²¹⁵
HEIDI	Heterogeneity in Dependent Instruments	C++	http://cnsgenomics.com/software/smr/	Zhu et al ²¹⁶

cfDNA, cell-free DNA;
CP, constrained projection;
DHS, DNase-hypersensitive site;

DMC, differentially methylated CpG;
DMR, differentially methylated region;
GSEA, Gene-Set Enrichment Analysis;
GWAS, genome-wide association study;
5 NMF, non-negative matrix factorization;
NOMe-seq, Nucleosome Occupancy and Methylome sequencing;
QP, quadratic programming;
RRBS, reduced representation bisulfite sequencing;
10 WGBS, whole-genome bisulfite sequencing.

GLOSSARY:

- 5 Epigenome-wide-association studies (EWAS). Study designs that involve measuring an epigenetic mark (normally DNA methylation) in cases and controls to identify disease-associated differences.
- Bisulfite conversion
A technique in which DNA is treated with bisulfite, resulting in modification of unmethylated cytosines into thymines (upon amplification), whereas methylated cytosines protected from modification.
- 10 Intra-sample normalization
The procedure of adjusting the raw data profile of a biological sample for technical biases and artefacts. This is often followed by inter-sample normalization, in which adjustments are made to the data for technical and biological factors which otherwise cause unwanted (and often confounding) data variation across samples.
- 15 Condition number
In the context of reference-based cell-type deconvolution, the condition number of a reference matrix represents an index of the numerical stability of the inference. Formally, it measures how sensitive the regression parameters (also known as cell weights) are to small perturbations or errors in the reference matrix.
- 20 Constrained projection (CP). Also known as quadratic programming (QP). A widely used technique for performing multivariate linear regression with constraints (such as non-negativity and normalization) imposed on the regression coefficients. In the context of cell-type deconvolution, the coefficients correspond to cell-type proportions in a sample, which by definition are non-negative and their sum must add to a number less than or equal to 1.
- 25 Supervised
A general term to describe any statistical inference that uses the phenotype of interest from the outset, for instance, when identifying features correlating with a phenotype.
- Feature selection
The statistical procedure of identifying features which, in some broad sense, correlate with an exposure or phenotype of interest (POI).
- 30 Beta distributions
The distributions of beta values. The beta value is a statistical term used to describe the quantification of DNA methylation at a given cytosine, as the ratio of methylated alleles to total number of alleles (methylated + unmethylated). a number which by definition must lie between 0 (fully unmethylated) and 1 (fully methylated).
- 35 Heteroscedastic
A property of a statistical distribution or of a random sample thereof, whereby the expected variance, or spread, is dependent on the mean.
- Logit transformation

A mathematical transformation that takes values defined on the unit interval (0,1) (e.g. beta values (β)) into values defined on the open interval (-infinity,+infinity), termed M-values. Mathematically, $M = \log_2[\beta/(1-\beta)]$.

- 5 Differentially methylated cytosines (DMCs). Cytosines (usually in a CpG context) that exhibit a statistically significant difference in DNA methylation between two groups of samples, according to some statistical test.
- 10 Differentially variable cytosines (DVCs). Cytosines (usually in a CpG context) that exhibit a statistically significant difference in the variance of DNA methylation between two groups of samples, according to some statistical test.
- 15 Field defects
Refers to genetic or epigenetic alterations that are thought to predate the development of cancer and that are usually seen in the normal tissue found adjacent to cancer.
- Type-1 error rate
The probability of erroneously calling the result of a test significant (positive) when the underlying true hypothesis is the null. It corresponds to the fraction of true negatives that are called positive, also known as the false positive rate.
- 20 Variably methylated cytosines (VMCs). Cytosines (usually in a CpG context) that exhibit a significant amount of variance in DNA methylation, as assessed across independent samples and relative to other CpG sites.
- 25 Variably methylated regions (VMRs). Contiguous genomic regions where DNA methylation is highly variable relative to a normal 'ground state'. A VMR can be defined for one given sample.
- 30 Differentially variable regions (DVRs). Contiguous genomic regions containing a statistically significant number of differentially variable cytosines (DVCs). This is different from a variably methylated region (VMR) in that a DVR is derived by comparing a relatively large number of cases and controls.
- Expression quantitative trait loci (eQTLs). A gene whose expression level is correlated with a single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP). If the SNP occurs close (definitions vary, but it could range from 10 kb to a 1 Mb window centred on the transcription start site) to the gene, it is called *cis*-eQTL, otherwise *trans*-eQTL.
- 35 Methylation quantitative trait loci (mQTLs). CpG sites whose DNA methylation level is correlated with a single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP). If the SNP occurs close to the CpG (within a 10 kb window), it is called *cis*-mQTL, otherwise *trans*-mQTL.
- Expression quantitative trait methylation loci

(eQTM). A gene whose expression level is correlated with the DNA methylation level of a CpG. If the CpG occurs close to the gene (within a 250 kb window), it is called a *cis*-eQTM.

5 Principal component analysis
(PCA). An unsupervised dimensionality reduction algorithm, which decomposes the data matrix into a sum of linear principal components (PCs) of variation, ranked by decreased variance and uncorrelated to each other.

10 Independent component analysis
(ICA). An unsupervised dimensionality reduction algorithm, which decomposes the data matrix into a sum of linear components of variation, which are as statistically independent from each other as possible. Statistical independence is a stronger condition than the linear uncorrelatedness of principal component analysis (PCA) components, allowing improved modelling of sources of variation in complex data.

15 Blind source separation
(BSS). This refers to the problem of inferring the sources of variation in a data matrix without using any prior information ('blind'). Algorithms that can achieve this are called BSS algorithms, of which independent component analysis (ICA) is one example.

Latent components
A general term for components or sources of data variation, which are 'hidden' (or latent), and which are inferred from the data using an unsupervised algorithm.

20 Surrogate Variable Analysis
(SVA). A widely used technique for selecting features associated with a factor of interest, which are not confounded by other factors. SVA uses a model to identify the data variation that is orthogonal to the factor of interest and subsequently uses principal component analysis (PCA) on this data variation matrix to construct 'surrogate variables' (SVs), which in theory should capture confounding sources of variation.

25 Phenotype of interest
(POI). The factor or variable of interest in an epigenome-wide association study (EWAS). This factor is often binary, representing case-control status, but could also represent an ordinal variable (e.g. genotype), or be continuous (e.g. age).

30 Tensor
A multi-dimensional array with the number of dimensions often called the 'order' or 'rank' of the tensor, and for which linear decomposition algorithms are available, analogous to linear matrix factorization algorithms for data matrices. Scalars, vectors and matrices are tensors of order 0, 1 and 2, respectively.

35 TF hubs
In the context of a regulatory network where edges represent regulatory interactions between transcription factors (TFs) and target genes, TF hubs represent those TFs with the largest number of interactions.

Gene Set Enrichment Analysis
(GSEA). A widely used statistical procedure to assess whether a derived gene list of interest is enriched for specific biological terms, usually including gene ontologies, signalling pathways, specific transcriptomic signatures or targets of gene regulators.

Mendelian randomization

A technique to estimate the effect of an exposure on an outcome using genetic variants and instrumental variables for the exposure. This approach can also be applied to assessing mediation.

5

Pleiotropy

This occurs when a genetic variant is associated with multiple traits. Vertical pleiotropy occurs when the traits are all on the same pathway (and is generally less of a problem), whereas horizontal pleiotropy exists where a genetic variant is associated with multiple traits via separate pathways.

10

Confounding

When the relationship between an exposure and an outcome is not causal but is due to the effects of a third variable (the confounder) on the exposure and the outcome. White blood cell heterogeneity can act as a confounder in many epigenetic studies.

15

System epigenomics

An emerging field whereby cellular phenotypes in normal development and disease are modelled as complex systems, and using tools from complexity science (e.g. dynamical system theory or statistical physics) to understand them.

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Online links

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Computational Systems Genomics Lab: <http://www.picb.ac.cn/compsysg>
European BLUEPRINT Epigenome Mapping Consortium: <http://www.blueprint-epigenome.eu>
European Genome-Phenome Archive (EGA): <https://www.ebi.ac.uk/ega>
Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO): <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo>

- Human Epigenome Atlas: <http://www.epigenomeatlas.org>
 ICGC Data Portal: <http://dcc.icgc.org/web>
 International Human Epigenome Consortium: <http://www.ihec-epigenomes.org>
 US NIH Roadmap Epigenomics Mapping Consortium: <http://www.roadmapepigenomics.org>
 5 Genetics of DNA Methylation Consortium: <http://www.godmc.org.uk/>

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Key Points

- ***Cell-type heterogeneity can be a major source of confounding and reverse causation in EWAS. Adjustment for cell-type composition is therefore critical for an improved interpretation and understanding of EWAS.***
- ***For a given study, the best choice of cell-type deconvolution algorithm depends not only on the tissue and phenotype of interest, but also on the presence of other confounders and the desired output.***
- ***Most variation in DNAm is driven by genetic factors and cell-type heterogeneity, with corresponding features (mQTLs and cell-type specific DMCs) readily identifiable using linear modeling.***
- ***Identification and interpretation of DNAm changes that accrue with age or exposure to environmental disease risk factors, may benefit from differential variance statistics.***
- ***Analyzing patterns of covariation in DNA methylation at regulatory elements can help identify disrupted regulatory networks and gene-modules in disease.***
- ***The inverse association between DNAm at regulatory elements and transcription factor binding can be exploited to elucidate the functional role of non-coding GWAS SNPs, or functional effects caused by exposure to environmental disease risk factors.***
- ***Mendelian Randomization can help to clarify the role of DNAm as a causal mediator between exposure to risk factors and disease.***

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed to all aspects of manuscript researching, discussion, writing and editing.

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The wealth of DNA methylation data continues to grow rapidly, including from epigenome-wide association studies (EWAS). However extracting meaningful biological and clinical information requires diverse computational approaches for data analysis. This Review discusses the range of statistical tools available, including for cell-type deconvolution, identification of important methylation data features, causation, and system-level integration with other omics data types.